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## Orinda downtown development swings toward greater housing density, taller buildings

By Sora O'Doherty

Downtown development continues to be a focus of Orinda government, and the city council received an update on March 2, which was followed by another on March 16, and then, perhaps, action in April. Planning Director Drummond Buckley told the council that the city is unlikely to add housing in an amount sufficient to bring substantial new retail to downtown Orinda, but yet must consider it in order to meet state demands that cities provide for housing.

Outgoing city manager Steve Salomon, retiring next month, said that the elephant in the downtown planning room is the juggernaut in Sacramento. State government continues, and will continue, in Salomon's opinion, to demand that cities provide for more housing and if they fail to do so, the cities run the risk of losing land use control to the state.

"We know we have to meet RHNA requirements, we want to improve downtown; how do we fit these together?" mused Buckley, concluding, "If we don't plan carefully, it could be a real mess."

Jason Moody, the city consultant from Economic & Planning Systems, Inc. presented to the council the Economic Analysis for the Orinda Downtown Precise Plan containing economic analysis, build-out assumptions, and potential building height increases. He explained that because Orinda is mostly built out now, development would have to occur on already developed parcels, and the cost of land acquisition and assembly is a major factor.

"You need more density than you already have to incentivize development, but higher density is likely to be infeasible without the density bonus," he told the council, "except the Masonic Center which is likely feasible without density bonus." Although increased density would likely not increase the total amount of retail, Moody thought that it might result in better retail, increased assessed values, and increased retail sales in the downtown area.

In public comments, Nick Waranoff branded the city council as "absolutely heartless" to existing businesses and urged it to defund the downtown development process. Charles Porges agreed with Waranoff, but Matt Fogarty said, "I welcome redevelopment of downtown and having higher density." Fogarty said he has lived in Orinda for 20 years and believes that higher density housing and more retail will improve downtown.

In council discussion, Council Member Inga Miller described downtown development as a complicated process. "We need to look at the numbers suggested. We have a huge RHNA number to accommodate," she said, that caused her to be "increasingly concerned that we don't lose having restaurants in our community, or losing a grocery store. I would hate to see where we are forced to get rid of retail because we have to accommodate housing for people to work in San Francisco.

"We don't need an Apple store," she concluded, "but you should at least be able to buy an apple in Orinda!" Vice Mayor Dennis Fay questioned how Orinda can protect existing businesses. Mayor Amy Worth commented that Proposition 19, which limits tax benefits for certain transfers of real property between family members, will have a huge impact on this. Costs to maintain the buildings under Proposition 13 have been very low. Any property that was going to be transferred had to be transferred by Jan. 15.

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